DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 316 TM 008 356

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TITLE The Problem of Grade Inflation.
PUB DATE [Oct 78]
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Education Records Bureau (New York, New York, October, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; Administrator Role; Educational Problems; *Educational Trends; *Grades (Scholastic); Grading; Higher Education; Student Evaluation; Student Role; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Grade Inflation

ABSTRACT

A number of factors have contributed to the inflation of grades in higher education, including: the belief that grades traumatize and dehumanize students; the conviction that academic standards are unfair in light of the equality of each individual; teachers' hesitation to fail high-risk or open enrollment students; the influence of popular grading practices on student evaluations of teacher performance; pressure to eliminate certain course requirements; and innovations such as pass fail grading. Administrators have gone along with student demands to minimize evaluation procedures, according to three basic rationales: that grades are inherently inaccurate; that they traumatize students, foster competition, and harm students' ability to learn; and that the categorizing nature of grades defeats one of the essential purposes of education--to help students develop their individuality. Each of these arguments can be refuted. The practice of assigning inflated grades should not be continued, because it leads to a decrease in basic skills, gives students a distorted view of their abilities, and fosters mediocrity. (GDC)

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THE PROBLEM OF GRADE INFLATION

Steven M. Cahn

Nowadays grades are as inflated as prices. The "gentleman's C" of yesteryear has given way to the "gentleman's B+." Students are distinctive not when they are on the Dean's list, but when they are off it. Were we to judge the intellectual State of the Union by the number of A's awarded students, our nation would seem to have miraculously created a society of scholars. Of course, nothing of the sort has happened.

But what then has caused grades to rise so dramatically? And why is the phenomenon so widespread? No one cause is a sufficient explanation. At least a dozen factors have been involved, most important of which has been the steady erosion of commitment to the concept of grading. The conviction has grown that grades are inherently inaccurate devices which, in attempting to measure people, succeed only in traumatizing and dehumanizing them.

These charges, sincere but in my judgment erroneous, will be considered shortly. What we must first realize is that such philosophical unrest has implications extending far beyond the mere dispensation of letters and numbers. The crisis of grade inflation and the simultaneous controversy over the very legitimacy of any grading procedures are symptomatic of a malaise in academic life reflecting and affecting society at large.

This address was delivered at the 1978 Annual Meeting of the Education Records Bureau.

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Think back a few years when campuses were beseiged by bands of rioting students. The major incentive for the call to activism was the Vietnam War, but long-standing issues such as minority rights and student freedom were also prominent. The quintessential opponent was "the power structure," in all its governmental, industrial, and social manifestations. Authority was to be torn down, power to be returned to "the people." Universities were viewed as in alliance with that power structre, indoctrinating those who would eventually be handed control of society. Protestors connected the nation they perceived as engaging in all varieties of social and political oppression with the educational institutions they saw as fostering bitter competition among students imprisoned within archaic academic traditions. Therefore colleges, at first only the site of attacks against governmental policies, became themselves the target of attacks by groups who judged forays against the educational establishment as direct blows against "the system."

Remember also that protesters throughout the 60's had called for an end to all discrimination. At first such demands were directed against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or nationality. But when efforts to meet these demands appeared insufficient, the academic power structure came to be considered not only a political enemy but also a moral enemy. And so another form of discrimination came under attack: discrimination on the basis of achievement.

The principles of this new egalitarianism stated that it made no sense to try to distinguish good scholarship from bad, since each person's work was excellent in its own way. Interpersonal comparisons were not justifiable.

The consummation of this rejection of standards was the conviction that each member of the academic community was equal in every relevant respect, and, therefore, none was entitled to be in a position of authority. Degrees and awards were but trappings of elitism, the worst of sins.

As this line of thought began to permeate the schools, they instituted a series of policies meant to establish an aura of freedom and equality. In reality, however, these innovations led to the present panic over grade inflation and have brought to the fore the question of just what responsibilities our educational institutions should be fulfilling.

The first change occurred some years ago when colleges yielded to pressure from various sources and admitted to regular status a variety of students who lacked solid high-school educations. When many of these "high-risk" students proved unequal to college work, teachers were loathe to fail clusters of them and conveniently lowered standards.

This increase in the student population demanded a corresponding increase in the number of faculty. But many of

these new teachers, concerned about impersonal elements they had faced in their own educations, found themselves far more intent upon befriending their students rather than instructing them, and standards were lowered as an act of camaraderie.

Furthermore, in the midst of the Vietnam War, non-college men were subject to the draft, and a professor who contributed to a student's failing out of school might, in effect, have been sending him off to war. Pressures to ease standards rose sharply.

Another relevant factor had its roots in the early 60's when there appeared on campuses faculty-evaluation booklets put together by students. Originally an amusing novelty, these lighthearted compilations were intended to help registering students by providing tips about the more and less interesting teachers and courses available at a particular school. In the past few years, however, these informal reactions have been transformed into complex statistics which are used by administrators to determine an instructor's competence and to decide upon his reappointment, promotion, and even tenure. What teacher wishes to antagonize his judges? And how much easier it is to be designated a popular teacher when one awards popular grades.

Since the early 70's, after faculties had been constantly bombarded by the claim that all members of the academic community

should be treated as equals, students have been granted a major role in determining course content and the criteria by which competence is to be assessed. Clearly, a student can gain a good grade with far less difficulty when he himself is the arbiter of what is to be taught and how much needs to be learned.

Naturally, students who are being asked how courses should be constructed are allowed virtually complete autonomy in choosing their own programs. Therefore, required courses in history, literature, foreign languages, the sciences, and philosophy are now almost extinct, and as a result students have been able to avoid work in their areas of weakness.

Due to the abolition of required courses, departments have been forced to compete for students in order to maintain the size of their faculties. One sure way is to lower standards. How many students will seek to concentrate in a department reputed to award low grades?

To make their individual courses even more attractive, many teachers have abandoned examinations and based graders solely upon term papers. But even the poorest student can construct a passable term paper by rehashing ideas taken from a book or borrowed from a friend. Under proper examination conditions, however, books are closed and friends are silent. And every teacher knows that a low grade on an examination is far easier to justify than a low grade on a term paper.

Another concomitant to student curricular authority has been the phenomenon of granting credit for a student's "life experiences." But how can a faculty member justify giving a student low grades for his life experiences?

Several years ago many schools, in an attempt to encourage students to sample unfamiliar courses, instituted an option permitting a student to take one course per term in which he would receive no letter or number grade, but only a "pass" or "fail." Before long, however, student pressure led to this option being stretched to apply to an entire academic career, or at least to a majority of courses. Now in any subject that causes difficulties tracks can be covered with a discreet "pass," a word that tells no tales.

As the general attitude toward grades became openly antagonistic, numerous faculties around the country voted to eliminate the grade of F. At these institutions a student may now take the same course again and again until he passes, and then only the passing grade is recorded. Of course, grades tend to be higher the second or third time around.

Thus we have reached a state where the traditional grading system is a shambles, the victim of well-meaning but misguided crusaders who have attempted to remedy the political follies and social inequities of our time by obliterating academic standards.

But the blame should not be borne by this group alone. For as this unfortunate situation has been developing, little reaction has come from any other quarter toward restoration of standards. Quite to the contrary, the attitude of many in positions of responsibility has been a desire to go along with student demands and minimize evaluation procedures. Three basic rationales have been offered in defense of this policy.

The first is that grades are inherently inaccurate, that the same paper would be graded differently by different instructors. Therefore, the grade is merely an indication of a particular instructor's bias.

But this criticism is based upon a misconception. Teachers in the same discipline usually agree as to which of their students are doing outstanding work and which are doing good, fair, or poor work (or no work at all). Naturally, two competent instructors may offer divergent evaluations, but that experts disagree is no reason to assume there is no such thing as expertise. Two competent physicians may differ in their evaluations of a patient's condition, but we would be foolish to assume that medical opinions as a rule are biased and unreliable. Invariably experts, like all of us, at times disagree about complex judgments, but surely that should not obscure the fact that in any established field of inquiry some individuals are knowledgeable and others are not.

If the opinions of faculty experts are no longer considered reliable, this situation is traceable to the irresponsibility of those teachers who dismiss all grades as educationally worthless and award nothing but A's in order to promote the general happiness.

A second criticism of grades is that they traumatize students, that they foster competition and arouse bitterness and hostility, transforming an otherwise tranquil academic atmosphere into a pressure-filled, nerve-wracking situation unsuited for genuine learning. Supposedly, students become so worried about obtaining good grades that they cannot obtain a good education.

But this criticism emphasizes only the possible harmful effects of competition, overlooking its benefits. Often only by competing with others do we bring out the best in ourselves. Competition fosters excellence, and without that challenge most of us would be satisfied with accomplishing far less than our abilities warrant.

However, even if competition had no beneficial effects, it would still be an inherent part of academic life, for it is an inherent part of almost every aspect of life. Many people have the same goals, but only a comparative few can achieve them. Not everyone who so desires can be a surgeon, a lawyer,

an engineer, or a professional football player. Thus competition arises. And since academic success is desired not only for its own sake but also because it relates to success in so many other competitive fields, competition will always exist in academic life.

The question, then, is not whether competition should be eliminated from the academic sphere, but how it can be utilized most effectively. The key is to encourage each student to strive as vigorously as possible to fulfill his own potential, to praise his best efforts and to appeal to pride when his energies flag. Such treatment does not lead him to emphasize good grades in place of a good education, for he cannot achieve that education without mastery of subject matter. And if grades are awarded as they should be, on the basis of a student's level of achievement, then they will not displace education, but symbolize it.

Of course, as grades become inflated and the pressure for jobs and admission to graduate and professional schools increases, the inevitable competition is no longer a matter of mastering subject matter and skills, but instead turns into sheer academic warfare, invoking all varieties of deception and dishonesty. This is precisely the phenomenon reported some time ago in The New York Times. According to that article, campuses around the

country have witnessed a growing tendency toward "student sabotage of student's work," the "demise of student honor systems," and "an increase in the number of students seeking medical counseling for the nervous strain of grade-grubbing." After all, if A's are awarded indiscriminately, who can afford a B? Those who distribute inflated grades and then argue that their actions are justifiable in view of the harmful effects of competition are confused. It is grade inflation which brings to the fore the worst aspects of the competitive process, for grades are thus divorced from academic acheivement, and competition for grades is thereby rendered anti-educational.

A third criticism of grades is that in attempting to measure people, they succeed only in dehumanizing and categorizing them, depriving them of their uniqueness and reducing them to a letter of the alphabet. Thus, it is said, grades defeat one of the essential purposes of an education: to aid each student in developing his individuality.

A grade, however, need not and ought not be a measure of a person. It is rather a measure of a person's level of achievement in a particular course of study. To give a student a C in an introductory physics course is not to say he is a C person with a C personality or C moral character, only that he has a C level of achievement in introductory physics.

Grades no more reduce students to letters than batting averages reduce baseball players to numbers. That Ted Williams had a lifetime batting average of .344 and Joe Garagiola one of .257 means only that Williams was a better hitter than Garagiola, not a better person. And why do we dehumanize either man by comparing their hitting skills?

Indeed, to recognize an individual's strengths and weaknesses, his areas of expertise, competence, and ignorance, is not to deny but to emphasize individuality. Grades, awarded fairly, do not dehumanize; on the contrary, they contribute to a recognition of an individual's uniqueness and to the possible development of his special interests and abilities. Those who awarded inflated grades are undermining these worthwhile goals and, in a mistaken attempt to avoid what they imagine to be dehumanizing effects, engaging in what must be described as hypocrisy, awarding a student a grade he is known not to deserve. Surely something is amiss when teachers resort to deception in an attempt to treat people with respect and genuine concern.

Many an instructor who inflates grades is proud of never giving students a hard time or underestimating the value of a student's efforts. But high grading is a foolish source of pride, suggesting that the teacher is unable to recognize poor work when he sees it. Not to differentiate between two students, one doing poor work and the other doing fair or good work, is a

subtle form of discrimination against the better student. Such actions undermine the educational process, which ought to provide students with the tools they will need to participate most effectively as free persons in a free society. To assure students that they have acquired requisite skills they, in fact, lack cannot be proper pedagogic strategy. What ever happened to the Socratic ideal of leading a student to recognize the extent of his own ignorance?

In recent years, as schools have found themselves under attack by forces within and without the campus, administrations and faculties have frequently abandoned principles in an effort at pacification. Many policies have been enacted without appropriate regard for educational standards and without due respect for academic excellence. Not surprisingly, some disastrous results have ensued.

Numerous universities now advertise the fact that their students have been freed from any required courses, including those courses previously used to reinforce such basics as reading and writing. But at the same time teachers throughout the country have complained about the inability of undergraduates to write a literate paragraph, to understand even a moderately difficult essay, or to follow an argument and respond with clarity. Students are too often taking one specialized course

after another, absorbing isolated bits of information, but failing to make substantial progress because of their weak grasp of fundamentals.

In this age of television, many young people come to the classroom already having been witness to momentous events occurring thousands of miles away and having been sensitized to the injustices suffered by large segments of mankind in every part of the globe. But this increased awareness, while certainly advantageous, is no substitute for a formal eduation. Today's students, like their counterparts years ago, need to acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to make a success of their lives as citizens of a democracy. And the first step toward this challenging goal is to realize the extent of the challenge.

Grades were a traditional tool for making students award of their own limitations. But how can we expect a student to come to grips with his own deficiencies when he finds himself automatically receiving nothing but A's, B's, and Passes? When reward is so easily obtained, who would imagine that real acheivement requires self-discipline and sacrifice? When a freshman yet to finish a college course votes in an academic meeting with the same power accorded a distinguished professor, who will have any respect for the years of hard work involved in acquiring intellectual sophistication? In sum, if students are applauded for accomplishing comparatively little, why should they be expected to strive for much more?

And our society will soon be absorbing the consequences of these misguided educational policies. It is unlikely that students who graduate with distorted pictures of their own abilities will realize their need to learn when they enter a business or profession. And it it unlikely that those who have been allowed to mistake mediocrity for excellence will develop an appreciation for quality.

What actions can be taken? One suggestion is that school transcripts include not only a student's course grade but also the average grade of all students in that course. In this way grade inflation would at least be publicly exposed.

But responsibility ultimately lies with the individual instructor. He must not be allowed to forget that a crucial part of good teaching is preparing effective examinations and providing accurate grades. To do less is unprofessional. If our faculties are to be worthy of respect, they must live up to their societal obligations and provide each of their students with realistic evaluations.

After all, the welfare of a democratic community depends ultimately upon decisions made by all its members, and, therefore, an enlightened democracy commits itself to an equal concern for each person's education. To be genuine, such concern must

manifest itself in a willingness to differentiate in individual cases between clarity and obscurity, accuracy and carelessness, knowledge and ignorance. Properly used, grades emphasize these distinctions and are an invaluable aid to an individual's intellectual development. If rigorous standards are not enforced, education become mere sham, and in that case both our students and our nation will be the losers.